

Wildlife Safety

Bears

When you step onto the trail in the Absaroka Range of northwestern Wyoming, things feel different. Maybe it's the sign at the trailhead saying "Warning: You are entering Grizzly Bear Country" that heightens your awareness. Maybe it is a track the size of a dinner plate with claw marks several inches long or a piece of cinnamon-colored fur caught on a tree branch that causes the hairs at the back of your neck to stand up. Whatever it is, suddenly your senses are on high alert. Every branch snap has meaning and you find yourself scanning distant ridges for signs of bears.

The chance to explore a wild place that is still inhabited by large predators is a special gift, but one that also comes with responsibility. Predators have suffered at the hands of humans. Their habitat has shrunk, their food sources have been depleted, and their numbers have dwindled since Europeans first arrived in North America. Grizzlies in particular have been driven into smaller and smaller pockets of uninhabited territory in the Lower 48. As we head into those pockets for our wilderness adventure, we need to recognize that we are entering one of the few remaining places a bear can call home. Our behavior in these places can have a dramatic impact on the future of these animals.

Bears are opportunistic omnivores who follow their nose to the next meal. This skill has kept them fed, but it has also resulted in "problem bears," or bears that associate humans with food. Once this association has been made, a bear is generally doomed. Most land managers give a bear two chances to reform, after that it is destroyed if it comes into someone's camp looking for a handout. Bears are not cuddly, harmless pets. They have killed and mauled humans, sometimes without an understandable cause. But often the hype surrounding a bear attack overshadows reality. According to bear expert Steven Herrero, there were fewer than 200 grizzly-related injuries to humans between 1900 and 1980, with only 14 deaths. Black bear attacks are more common, but of the 500 people attacked by black bears between 1960 and 1980, 90 percent of the injuries were

considered minor. The number of bears killed in those same time periods is not recorded, but in the summer of 2000 alone, three grizzly bears were killed by mistake in Wyoming. This number represents just one state and just one summer, so undoubtedly we are talking about hundreds, if not thousands of bears that have lost their lives over the years because they couldn't get along with their human neighbors.

Bears, both black and grizzly, are most dangerous when surprised or threatened. Therefore, the first step to peaceful coexistence is to avoid an unexpected encounter. Make noise when you are traveling in bear country, especially in spots where visibility is limited by vegetation. Travel in groups of three or more and stay close together. Watch for bear sign—tracks, smells of carrion, clawed trees, etc. If you smell a carcass, go out of your way to avoid it. Be particularly wary of a female grizzly with cubs. You don't want to come between mama bear and her babies, or any bear and its dinner.

When you camp in bear country, separate your cooking area from the place you plan to sleep by at least 100 yards. If possible, cook close to rivers where the smell of your pan-fried fish will be carried away by winds that move up and down valleys. Concentrate all odors in the cooking area. In some cases, you may even consider storing the clothes you cook in with food and other odorous items. Anything that smells should either be hung up overnight or stored in a bear-proof container. This includes toothpaste, soap and bug repellent. Food suspended from trees must be at least ten feet off the ground and four feet from tree trunks or large branches to make sure that it is out of reach of bears. Hanging food can be tricky, so allow yourself plenty of time before dark to get set up.

If you have an encounter with a bear, your reaction should be determined by the situation. When the bear is less than 100 yards from you, let it know you are there by speaking in a low firm voice. Bunch up with your traveling companions and wave your arms so that you look large. Don't meet the bear's eyes or move toward it. These actions can be interpreted as signs of aggression and could trigger an attack. If the bear charges, do not run. Most charges are bluffs intended to intimidate. If you run, you become prey. If the bear gets close to you and you are carrying pepper spray, aim for the bear's face

and shoot several short blasts. Ideally these tactics will convince the bear that it is better off leaving you alone.

In the event of an actual attack, your response depends on the species. With grizzly bears, drop to the ground and play dead after contact is made. Your best bet is to lie flat on your stomach, legs spread, hands protecting your neck. With black bears, on the other hand, most experts say that you should defend yourself aggressively.

Pepper spray (boxed item)

- Pepper sprays are made from capsicum (tropical pepper plants) and have been found to be highly effective in warding off bears when used properly.
- Carry the spray where you can get to it quickly. A holster on your hip belt designed for a quick draw is an effective way to transport the cannister.
- Practice drawing and firing (on a calm day!). This will make you comfortable with using the spray, as well as familiarize you with its range, which is typically 10 to 15 feet.
- If attacked aim for the bear's face. The spray will not deter the bear unless it hits the bear directly in the eyes and nose.
- Studies have shown that bears are actually attracted to pepper spray after it has been discharged. If you have to use pepper spray to ward off an attack or you have sprayed it around your camp for any reason, it is time for you to pack up and move away from the site. Any item that may have been sprayed should be stored with your food.

Mountain lions.

Mountain lions are attracting more publicity as humans encroach further and further into their habitat. As one might expect, this encroachment is resulting in a rising number of encounters between humans and lions, or lions and pets. While the number of human fatalities resulting from these encounters is quiet small, they do happen, so mountain lions deserve to be treated with respect. Mountain lions are stealthy and secretive. You rarely see one unless it allows itself to be seen. Because of this behavior, the guidelines for safe travel in lion country are less defined than they are for camping in bear habitat. It's hard to know what keeps mountain lions away because you see them so infrequently.

In general, experienced backcountry travelers do not advocate making noise to deter mountain lions. Nor do people recommend using bear camping practices in lion country. Mountain lions do not seem to be attracted to human food, but they do occasionally see humans as prey. Solitary children, adults or pets running have been known to trigger attacks. Group travel, on the other hand, seems to be a deterrent. Experts also recommend that you avoid travel at dawn or dusk when lions are most active.

If you see a mountain lion, gather your group together. Pick up children so they are less vulnerable and you both appear larger. Speak firmly. Back away slowly if the lion is next to a carcass or protecting its young. If a mountain lion does attack, your best bet is to fight back. Try to stay on your feet and protect your neck and face. A walking stick can be a useful weapon. Remember that it is extremely rare for mountain lions to attack and kill people.

Other wildlife considerations.

Although not as dramatic or charismatic as bears and mountain lions, rodents and birds are probably going to be the wildlife you have the most interaction with in the Wilderness. Around established campsites, you are likely to be plagued by mice, grey jays, or marmots begging for a handout. In pristine areas, the animals may not associate you with an easy meal, but if you leave a messy camp, they soon will. To avoid habituating animals, pick up food scraps and store them in a plastic garbage bag. Place your food in an animal-proof container such as a plastic bowl or cooking pot with a tight lid. You can also hang food a few feet off the ground to deter camp robbers. To stop mice from scampering up and down the rope that suspends your food, poke a hole in a plastic lid and place it midway down the rope. This creates a barrier that most mice can't negotiate.

Links and Resources:

The following sites contain information about grizzly bears, including habitat descriptions, life cycle details, and safety precautions:

<http://home.att.net/~jrmusgrove/>

<http://www.jacksonholewyoming.net/grizzly.html>

http://species.fws.gov/bio_griz.html

For details on pepper spray and its effects on bears, check out Counter Assault and UDAP's websites. These sites are commercial sites that allow you to order pepper spray online. They also contain educational material and firsthand accounts of pepper spray in action.

<http://www.counterassault.com/>

<http://www.udap.com/>

For information on mountain lions, check out the following websites:

http://www.desertusa.com/may96/du_mlion.html

<http://www.mountainlion.org/>

Books:

Harvey, Mark, *The National Outdoor Leadership School's Wilderness Guide*, Fireside Books, New York, 1999

Herrero, Steven, *Bear Attacks: Their Causes and Avoidance*, Nick Lyons Books, Winchester Press, New York, 1985

Howe, Steve, Alan Kesselheim, Dennis Coello and John Harlin, *Backpacker Magazine's Making Camp: The Complete Guide for Hikers, Mountain Bikers, Paddlers and Skiers*, The Mountaineers, Emmaus, PA 1997

Shelton, James Gary, *Bear Attacks: The Deadly Truth*, 1998

McMillan, Scott, *Mark of the Grizzly: True Stories of Recent Bear Attacks and the Hard Lessons Learned*, Falcon Publishing Co, New York, 1998